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MASTER SKYLARK.

—
BY JOHN BENNETT.
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CHAPTER I.

THE LORD ADMIRAL'S PLAYERS.

THERE was an unwonted buzzing in the east end of Stratford on that next to the last day of April, 1596. It was as if some one had thrust a stick into a hive of bees and they had come whirling out to see.

The low stone guard-wall of old Clopton bridge, built a hundred years before by rich Sir Hugh, sometime Mayor of London, was lined with straddling boys like strawberries upon a spear of grass, and along the low causeway from the west across the lowland to the town, brown-faced, barefoot youngsters sat beside the roadway with their chubby legs a-dangle down the mossy stones, staring away into the south across the grassy levels of the valley of the Stour.

Punts were poling slowly up the Avon to the bridge; and at the outlets of the town where the streets came down to the waterside among the weeds, little knots of men and serving-maids stood looking into the south and listening.

Some had waited for an hour; some for two: yet still there was no sound but the piping of the birds in white-thorn hedges, the hollow lowing of kine knee-deep in grassy meadows, and

the long rush of the river through the sedge beside the pebbly shore; and naught to see but quiet valleys, primrose lanes, and Warwick orchards white with bloom, stretching away to the misty hills.

But still they stood and looked and listened.

The wind came stealing up out of the south, soft and warm and sweet and still, moving the ripples upon the river with gray gusts; and, scudding free before the wind, a dog came trotting up the road with wet pink tongue and side-long gait. At the throat of Clopton bridge he stopped and scanned the way with dubious eye; then clapped his tail between his legs and bolted for the town. The laughing shout that followed him into the Warwick road seemed not to die away, but to linger in the air like the drowsy hum of bees—a hum that came and went at intervals upon the shifting wind, and grew by littles, taking body till it came unbroken as a long, low, distance-muffled murmur from the south, so faint as scarcely to be heard.

Nick Attwood pricked his keen young ears: "They 're coming, Robin—hark 'e to the trampling!"

Robin Getley held his breath and turned his ear toward the south. The far-off murmur was

a mutter now, defined and positive, and, as the two friends listened, grew into a drumming roll, and all at once above it came a shrill, high sound like the buzzing of a gnat close by the ear

Little Tom Davenant dropped from the finger-post, and came running



"PUNTS WERE POLING SLOWLY UP THE AVON TO THE BRIDGE."

up from the fork of the Banbury road, his feet making little white puffs in the dust as he flew. "They are coming—they are coming!" he shrieked as he ran.

Then up to his feet sprang Robin Getley, upon the saddle-backed coping-stones, his hand upon Nick Attwood's head to steady himself,

and looked away where the rippling Stour ran like a thread of silver beside the dust-buff London road, and the little church of Atherstone stood blue against the rolling Cotswold hills.

"They are coming—they are coming!" shrieked little Tom, and scrambled up the coping like a squirrel up a rail.



"LITTLE TOM DAVENANT DROPPED FROM THE FINGER-POST,
AND CAME RUNNING UP FROM THE FORK OF
THE BANBURY ROAD."

A stir ran out along the guard-wall; some crying out, some starting up. "Sit down, sit down!" cried others, peering askance at the water gurgling green down below. "Sit down, or we shall all be off!"

Robin held his hand above his eyes. A cloud of dust was rising from the London road and drifting off across the fields like smoke when the old ricks burn in damp weather—a long, broad-sheeted mist; and in it were bits of moving gold, shreds of bright colors vaguely seen, and silvery gleams like the glitter of polished metal in the sun. And as he looked the shifty wind came down out of the west again and whirled the cloud of dust away; and there he saw a long line of men upon horses coming at an easy canter up the highway. Just as he had made this out the line came rattling to a stop, the distant drumming of hoofs was still, and as the long file knotted itself into a rosette of ruddy

color amid the April green, a clear, shrill trumpet blew and blew again.

"They are coming!" shouted Robin,— "they are coming!" and, turning, waved his cap.

A shout went up along the bridge. Those down below came clambering up, the punts came poling with a rush of foam, and a ripple ran along the edge of Stratford town like the wind through a field of wheat. Windows creaked and doors swung wide, and the workmen stopped in the garden-plots to lean upon their mattocks and to look.

"They are coming!" bellowed Rafe Hickathrift, the butcher's boy, standing far out in the street with his red hands to his mouth for a trumpet—"they are coming!" and at that the doors of Bridge street grew alive with eager eyes.

At early dawn the Oxford carrier had brought the news that the players of the Lord High Admiral were coming up to Stratford out of



"'THEY ARE COMING!' BELLOWED THE BUTCHER'S BOY."

London from the south, to play on May-day there; and this was what had set the town to buzzing like a swarm. For there were in England then but three great companies, the High Chamberlain's, the Earl of Pembroke's men, and the stage-players of my Lord Charles Howard, High Admiral of the Realm: and the day on which they came into a Midland market-town to play was one to mark with red and gold upon the calendar of the uneventful year.

Away by the old mill-bridge there were fishermen angling for dace and perch; but when the shout came down from the London road they dropped their poles and ran, through the willows and over the gravel, splashing and thrashing among the rushes and sandy shallows not to be last when the players came. And old John Carter, coming down the Warwick road with a load of hay, laid on the lash until piebald Dobbin snorted in dismay and broke into a lumbering run to reach the old stone bridge in time.

The distant horsemen now were coming on again, riding in double file. They had flung their banners to the breeze, and on the changing wind, with the thumping of horses' hoofs, came by snatches the sound of a kettledrummer drawing his drumhead tight, and beating as he drew, and the muffled blasts of a trumpeter proving his lips.

Fynes Morrison and Walter Stirley, who had gone to Cowslip lane to meet the march, were running on ahead, and shouting as they ran: "There's forty men, and sumpter mules! And, oh, the bravest banners and attire — and the trumpets are a cloth-yard long! Make room for us, make room for us, and let us up!"

A bowshot off, the trumpets blew a blast so high, so clear, so keen, that it seemed a flame of fire in the air, and as the brassy fanfare died away across the roofs of the quiet town, the kettledrums clanged, the cymbals clashed, and all the company began to sing the famous old song of the hunt:

The hunt is up, the hunt is up,
Sing merrily we, the hunt is up!
The wild birds sing,
The dun deer fling,
The forest aisles with music ring!
Tantara, tantara, tantara!

Then ride along, ride along,
Stout and strong!
Farewell to grief and care;
With a rollicking cheer
For the high dun deer
And a life in the open air!
Tantara, the hunt is up, lads!
Tantara, the bugles bray!
Tantara, tantara, tantara,
Hio, harkaway!

The first of the riders had reached old Clifton bridge; and the banners strained upon their staves in the freshening river-wind. The trumpeters and the drummers led, their horses prancing, white plumes waving in the breeze, and the April sunlight dancing on the brazen horns and the silver bellies of the kettledrums.

Then came the banners of the company, curling down with a silky swish, and unfurling again with a snap like a broad-lashed whip. The greatest one was rosy-red, and on it was a gallant ship upon a flowing sea, bearing upon its mainsail the arms of my Lord Charles Howard, High Admiral of England. Upon its mate was a giant bearded man with a fish's tail, holding a trident in his hand and blowing upon a shell, the Triton of the seas which England ruled; this flag was bright sea-blue. The third was white, and on it was a red wild rose with a golden heart, the common standard of the company.

After the flags came two-score men, the players of the Admiral, the tiring-men, grooms, horse-boys and serving-knives, well mounted on good horses, and all of them clad in scarlet tabards blazoned with the coat-armor of their master. Upon their caps they wore the famous badge of the Howards, a rampant silver demi-lion; and beneath their tabards at the side could be seen their jerkins of many-colored silk, their silver-buckled belts, and long, thin Spanish rapiers, slapping their horses on the flanks at every stride. Their legs were cased in high-topped riding-boots of tawny cordovan, with gilt spurs, and the housings of their saddles were of blue with the gilt anchors of the admiralty upon them. On their bridles were jingling bits of steel, which made a constant tinkling like a thousand little bells very far away.

Some had faces smooth as boys, and were



THE LORD ADMIRAL'S PLAYERS. "THE TRUMPETERS AND THE DRUMMERS LED, THEIR HORSES PRANCING, WHITE PLUMES WAVING IN THE BREEZE."

quite young; and others wore sharp-pointed beards with stiff-waxed mustaches, and were older men with a tinge of iron in their hair, and lines of iron in their faces, hardened by the life they led; and some again were smooth-shaven, so often and so closely that their faces were blue with the beard beneath the skin. But, oh, to Nicholas Attwood and the rest of Stratford boys, they were a dashing, rakish, admirable lot, with the air of something even greater than lords, and a keen knowingness in their sparkling, worldly eyes that made a common wise man seem almost a fool beside them!

And so they came riding up out of the south:

Then ride along, ride along,
Stout and strong!
Farewell to grief and care;
With a rollicking cheer
For the high dun deer
And a life in the open air!

"Hurrah, hurrah! God save the Queen!"

A dropping shout went up the street like an arrow-flight scattering over the throng; and the players, waving their scarlet caps until the long line tossed like a poppy-garden in a summer rain, gave a cheer that fairly set the crockery to dancing upon the shelves of the stalls in Middle Row.

"Hurrah!" shouted Nicholas Attwood, his blue eyes shining with delight. "Hurrah, hurrah! for the Admiral's men!" And high in the air he threw his cap, as a wild cheer broke from the eddying crowd, and the arches of the long gray bridge rang hollow with the tread of hoofs. Whiff, came the wind; down dropped the hat upon the very saddle-peak of one tall fellow riding along among the rest. Catching it quickly as it fell, he laughed and tossed it back; and when Nick caught it whirling in the air, a shilling jingled from it to the ground.

Then up Fore Bridge street they all trooped after, into Stratford town.

"Oh," cried Robin, "it is brave, brave!"

"Brave?" cried Nick. "It makes my very heart jump. And see, Robin, 't is a shilling, a real silver shilling — oh, what fellows they all be! Hurrah for the Lord High Admiral's men!"

CHAPTER II.

NICHOLAS ATTWOOD'S HOME.

NICK ATTWOOD's father came home that night bitterly wroth.

The burgesses of the town council had ordered him to build a chimney upon his house, or pay ten shillings fine; and shillings were none too plenty with Simon Attwood, the tanner of Old Town.

"Soul and body o' man!" said he, "they talk as if they owned the world, and a man could na live upon it save by their leave. I must build my fire in a pipe, or pay ten shillings fine? Things ha' come to a pretty pass — a pretty pass, indeed!" He kicked the rushes that were strewn upon the floor, and ground the clay with his heel. "This litter will ha' to be all took out. Atkins will be here at six i' the morning to do the job; and a lovely mess he will make o' the house!"

"Do na fret thee, Simon," said Mistress Attwood gently. "The rushes need a changing, and I ha' pined this long while to lay the floor wi' new clay from Shottery common. 'T is the sweetest earth! Nick shall take the hangings down, and right things up when the chimley 's done."

So at cockcrow next morning Nick slipped out of his straw bed, into his clothes, and down the winding stair, while his parents were still asleep in the loft; and, sousing his head in the bucket at the well, began his work before the old town clock in the chapel tower had yet struck four.

The rushes had not been changed since Easter, and were full of dust and grease from the cooking and the table. Even the fresher sprigs of mint among them smelled stale and old. When they were all in the barrow, Nick sighed with relief, and wiped his hands upon the dripping grass.

It had rained in the night — a soft, warm rain, and the air was full of the smell of the apple-bloom and pear from the little orchard behind the house. The bees were already humming about the straw-bound hives along the garden wall, and a misguided green woodpecker clung upside down to the eaves, and thumped at the beams of the house.

It was very still there in the gray of the dawn. He could hear the rush of the water through the sedge in the mill-race; and then, all at once, the roll of the wheel, the low rumble of the mill-gear, and the cool whisper of the wind in the willows.

When he went back into the house again the painted cloths upon the wall seemed dingier than ever compared with the clean, bright world outside. The sky-blue coat of the Prodigal Son was brown with the winter's smoke; the Red Sea towered above Pharaoh's ill-starred host like an inky mountain; and the homely maxims on the next breadth — "Do no Wrong," "Beware of Sloth," "Overcome Pride," and "Keep an Eye on the Pence" — could scarcely be read.

Nick jumped up on the three-legged stool and began to take them down. The nails were crooked and jammed in the wall, and the last came out with an unexpected jerk. Losing his balance, Nick caught at the table-board which leaned against the wall, but the stool capsized and he came down on the floor with such a flap of tapestry that the ashes flew out all over the room.

He sat up dazed, and rubbed his elbows; then looked around, and began to laugh.

He could hear heavy footsteps overhead. A door opened, and his father's voice called sternly from the head of the stair: "What madcap folly art thou up to now?"

"I be up to no folly at all," said Nick, "but down, sir. I fell from the stool. There's no harm done."

"Then be about thy business," said Attwood, coming slowly down the stairs.

He was a gaunt man, smelling of leather and untanned hides. His short iron-gray hair grew low down upon his forehead, and his hooked nose, grim wide mouth, and heavy under jaw gave him a look at once forbidding and severe. His doublet of serge and his fustian hose were stained with liquor from the vats, and his eyes were heavy with sleep.

The smile faded from Nick's face. "Shall I throw the rushes into the street, sir?"

"Nay; take them to the muck-hill. The burgesses ha' made a great to-do about folk throwing trash into the highways. Soul and

body o' man!" he growled, "a man must ask if he may breathe. And good hides going a-begging, too!"

Nick hurried away, for he dreaded his father's sullen moods.

The swine were squealing in their styes, the cattle bawled about the straw-thatched barns in Chapel lane, and long files of gabbling ducks waddled hurriedly down to the river through the primroses under the hedge. He could hear the milkmaids calling in the meadows; and when he trundled slowly home the smoke was creeping up in pale-blue threads from the draught-holes in the wall.

The tanner's house stood a little back from the thoroughfare, in that part of Stratford-on-Avon where the south end of Church street turns from Bull lane toward the river. It was roughly built of timber and plaster, the black beams showing through the yellow lime in curious squares and triangles. The roof was of red tiles; and where the spreading elms leaned over it the peaked gable was green with moss.

At the side of the house was a garden of lettuce; beyond the garden a rough wall on which the grass was growing. Sometimes wild primroses grew on top of this wall, and once a yellow daffodil. Beyond the wall were other gardens owned by thrifty neighbors, and open lands in common to them all, where foot-paths wandered here and there in a free, haphazard way.

Behind the house was a well and a wood-pile, and along the lane ran a whitewashed paling fence with a little gate, from which the path went up to the door through rows of bright, old-fashioned flowers.

Nick's mother was getting the breakfast. She was a gentle woman with a sweet, kind face, and a little air of quiet dignity that made her doubly dear to Nick by contrast with his father's unkempt ways. He used to think that, in her worsted gown, with its falling collar of Antwerp linen, and a soft, silken coif upon her fading hair, she was the most beautiful woman in all the world.

She put one arm about his shoulders, brushed back his curly hair, and kissed him on the forehead.

"Thou art mine own good little son," said she tenderly, "and I will bake thee a cake in

the new chimley on the morrow for thy May-day feast."

Then she helped him fetch the trestles from the buttery, set the board, spread the cloth, and lay the wooden platters, pewter cups, and old horn spoons in place. Breakfast being ready, she then called his father from the yard. Nick waited deftly upon them both, so that they were soon done with the simple meal of rye-bread, lettuce, cheese, and milk.

As he carried away the empty platters and brought water and a towel for them to wash their hands, he said quietly, although his eyes were bright and eager, "The Lord High Admiral's company is to act a stage-play at the guildhall to-morrow before Master Davenant the Mayor and the town burgesses."

Simon Attwood said nothing, but his brows drew down.

"They came yestreen from London town by Oxford way to play in Stratford and at Coventry; and are at the Swan Inn with Master Geoffrey Inchbold—oh, ever so many of them, in scarlet jerkins, and cloth of gold, and doublets of silk laced up like any lord! It is a very good company, they say."

Mistress Attwood looked quickly at her husband. "What will they play?" she asked.

"I can na say, surely, mother—'Tamburlane,' perhaps, or 'The Troublesome Reign of Old King John.' The play will be free, father—may I go, sir?"

"And lose thy time from school?"

"There is no school to-morrow, sir."

"Then have ye naught to do that ye waste the day in idle folly?" asked the tanner sternly.

"I will do my work beforehand, sir," replied Nick quietly, though his hand trembled a little as he brushed up the crumbs.

"It is May-day, Simon," interceded Mistress Attwood, "and a bit of pleasure will na harm the lad."

"Pleasure?" said the tanner sharply; "if he does na find pleasure enough in his work, his book, and his home, he shall na seek it of low rogues and strolling scapegraces."

"But, Simon," said Mistress Attwood, "'t is the Lord Admiral's own company—surely they are not all graceless! And," she continued with very quiet dignity, "since mine own

cousin Anne Hathaway married Will Shakspeare the play-actor, 't is scarcely kind to call all players rogues and low."

"No more o' this, Margaret," cried Attwood, flushing angrily. "Thou art ever too ready with the boy's part against me. He shall na go—I'll find a thing or two for him to do among the vats that will take this taste for idleness out of his mouth. He shall na go: so that be all there is on it." Rising abruptly, he left the room.

Nick clenched his hands.

"Nicholas," said his mother softly.

"Yes, mother," said he; "I know. But he should na flout thee so! And, mother, the Queen goes to the play—father himself saw her at Coventry ten years ago. Is what the Queen does idle folly?"

His mother took him by the hand and drew him to her side, with a smile that was half a sigh: "Art thou the Queen?"

"Nay," said he; "and it's all the better for England, like enough. But surely, mother, it can na be wrong—"

"To honor thy father?" said she quickly, laying her finger across his lips. "Nay, lad, it is thy bounden duty."

Nick turned and looked up at her wonderingly. "Mother," said he, "art thou an angel come down out of heaven?"

"Nay," she answered, patting his flushed cheek. "I be only the every-day mother of a fierce little son who hath many a hard, hard lesson to learn. Now eat thy breakfast—thou hast been up a long while."

Nick kissed her impetuously and sat down; but his heart still rankled within him.

All Stratford would go to the play. He could hear the murmur of voices and music, the bursts of laughter and applause, the tramp of happy feet going up the guildhall stairs to the mayor's show. Everybody went in free at the mayor's show. The other boys could stand on stools and see it all. They could hold horses at the gate of the inn at the September fair, and so see all the farces. They could see the famous Norwich puppet-play. But he—what pleasure did he ever have? A tawdry pageant by a lot of clumsy country bumpkins at Whitsuntide or Pentecost, or a silly school-boy

masque at Christmas, with the master scolding like a heathen Turk. It was not fair.

And now he'd have to work all May-day. May-day out of all the year! Why, there was to be a May-pole and a morris-dance, and a roasted calf, too, in Master Wainwright's field, since Margery was chosen Queen of the May. And Peter Finch was to be Robin Hood, and Nan Rogers Maid Marian, and wear a kirtle of Kendal green—and oh, but the May-pole would be brave: high as the ridge of the guild-school roof, and hung with ribbons like a rainbow! Geoffrey Hall was to lead the dance, too, and the other boys and girls would all be there. And where would he be? Sousing hides in the tannery vats. Truly his father was a hard man!

He pushed the cheese away.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST STRAW.

LITTLE John Summer had a new horn-book that cost a silver penny. The handle was carved and the horn was clear as honey. The other little boys stood round about in speechless envy, or murmured their A B C's and "ba be bi's" along the chapel steps. The lower-form boys were playing leap-frog past the almshouse, and Geoffrey Gosse and the vicar's son were in the public gravel-pit, throwing stones at the robins in the Great House elms across the lane.

Some few dull fellows sat upon the steps behind the school-house, anxiously poring over their books. But the larger boys of the Fable Class stood in an excited group beneath the shadow of the overhanging second story of the grammar-school, talking all at once, each louder than the other, until the noise was deafening.

"Oh, Nick! such goings on!" called Robin Getley, whose father was a burgess, as Nick Attwood came slowly up the street, saying his sentences for the day over and over to himself, in hopeless desperation, having had no time to learn them at home. "Stratford Council has had a quarrel, and there's to be no stage-play after all."

"What?" cried Nick, in amazement. "No stage-play? And why not?"

"Why," said Robin, "it was just this way—my father told me of it. Sir Thomas Lucy, High Sheriff of Worcester, y' know, rode in from Charlote yesternoon, and with him Sir Edward Greville of Milcote. So the burgesses made a feast for them at the Swan Inn. Sir Thomas fetched a fine, fat buck, and the town stood good for ninepence wine and twopence bread, and broached a keg of sturgeon. And when they were all met together there, eating, and drinking, and making merry—what? Why, in came my Lord Admiral's players from London town, ruffling it like high dukes, and not caring two peps for Sir Thomas, or Sir Edward, or for Stratford burgesses all in a heap; but sat them down at the table straightway, and called for ale, as if they owned the place; and not being served as soon as they desired, they laid hands upon Sir Thomas's server as he came in from the buttery with his tray full, and took both meat and drink."

"What?" cried Nick.

"As sure as shooting, they did!" said Robin; "and when Sir Thomas's gentry yeomen would have seen to it—what? Why, my Lord Admiral's master-player clapped his hand to his poniard-hilt, and dared them come and take it if they could."

"To Sir Thomas Lucy's men?" exclaimed Nick, aghast.

"Ay, to their teeth! Sir Edward sprang up then and said it was a shame for players to behave so outrageously in Will Shakspeare's own home town. And at that Sir Thomas, who, ye know, has always misliked Will, flared up like a bull at a red rag, and swore that all stage-players be runagate rogues, anyway, and Will Shakspeare neither more nor less than a deer-stealing scape-gallows."

"Surely he did na say that in Stratford Council?" protested Nick.

"Ay, but he did—that very thing," said Robin; "and when that was out, the master-player sprang upon the table, overturning half the ale, and cried out that Will Shakspeare was his very own true friend, and the sweetest fellow in all England; and that whosoever gainsaid it was a hemp-cracking rascal, and that he would prove it upon his back with a quarter-staff whenever and wherever he chose, be he Sir Thomas Lucy,

St. George and the Dragon, Guy of Warwick, and the great dun cow, all rolled up in one!"

"Robin Getley, is this the very truth, or art thou cozening me?"

"Upon my word, it is the truth," said Robin. "And that 's not all. Sir Edward cried out 'Fie!' upon the player for a saucy varlet; but the fellow only laughed, and bowed quite low, and said that he took no offense from Sir Edward for saying that, since it could not honestly be denied, but that Sir Thomas did not know the truth from a truckle-bed in broad daylight, and was but the remnant of a gentleman to boot."

"The bold-faced rogue!"

"Ay, that he is," added Robin; "and for his boldness Sir Thomas straightway demanded that the High Bailiff refuse the company license to play in Stratford."

"Refuse the Lord High Admiral's players?"

"Marry, no one else. And then Master John Shakspeare, wroth at what Sir Thomas had said of his son Will, vowed that he would send a letter down to London town, and lay the whole coil before the Lord High Admiral himself. For ever since that he was high bailiff, the best companies of England had always been bidden to play in Stratford, and it would be an ill thing now to refuse the Lord Admiral's company after granting licenses to both my Lord Pembroke's and the High Chamberlain's."

"And so it would," spoke up Walter Roche; "for there are our own townsmen, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, who are cousins of mine, and John Hemyng and Thomas Greene, besides Will Shakspeare and his brother Edmund, all playing in the Lord Chamberlain's company in London before the Queen. It would be a black score against them all with the Lord Admiral — I doubt not he would pay them out."

"That he would," said Robin, "and so said my father and Alderman Henry Walker, who, y' know, is Will Shakspeare's own friend. And some of the burgesses who cared not a rap for that were afraid of offending the Lord Admiral. But Sir Thomas vowed that my Lord Howard was at Cadiz with Walter Raleigh and the young Earl of Sussex, and would by no means hear of it. So Master Bailiff Stubbes, who, 't is said, doth owe Sir Thomas forty pound, and is therefore under his thumb, forthwith refused

the company license to play in Stratford guild-hall, inn-yard, or common. And at that the master-player threw his glove into Master Stubbes's face, and called Sir Thomas a stupid old bell-wether, and Stratford burgesses silly sheep for following wherever he chose to jump."

"And so they be," sneered Hal Saddler.

"How?" cried Robin hotly. "My father is a burgess. Dost thou call him a sheep, Hal Saddler?"

"Nay, nay," stammered Hal hastily; "'t was not thy father I meant."

"Then hold thy tongue with both hands," said Robin sharply, "or it will crack thy pate for thee some of these fine days."

"But come, Robin," asked Nick eagerly, "what became of the quarrel?"

"Well, when the master-player threw his glove into Master Stubbes's face, the Chief Constable seized him for contempt of Stratford Council, and held him for trial. At that some cried 'Shame!' and some 'Hurrah!' — but the rest of the players fled out of town in the night, lest their baggage be taken by the law and they be fined."

"Whither did they go?" asked Nick, both sorry and glad to hear that they were gone.

"To Coventry, and left the master-player behind in gaol."

"Why, they dare na use him so — the Lord Admiral's own man!"

"Ay, that they don't! Why, hark 'e, Nick! This morning, since Sir Thomas has gone home, and the burgesses' heads have all cooled down from the sack and the clary they were in last night, la! but they are in a pretty stew, my father says, for fear that they have given offense to the Lord Admiral. So they have spoken the master-player softly, and given him his freedom out of hand; and a long gold chain to twine about his cap, to mend the matter with, beside."

"Whee-ew!" whistled Nick. "I wish I were a master-player!"

"Oh, but he will not be pleased, and says he will have his revenge on Stratford town if he must needs wait until the end of the world or go to the Indies after it. And he has had his breakfast served in Master Geoffrey Inchbold's own room at the Swan, and swears

that he will walk the whole way to Coventry sooner than straddle the horse that the bur-gesses have sent him to ride."

"What! Is he at the inn? Why, let's go down and see him."

"Master Brunswood says that he will birch whoever cometh late," objected Hal Saddler.

"Birch?" groaned Nick. "Why, he does nothing but birch! A fellow can na say his '*sum, es, est*' without catching it. And as for getting through the '*genitivo*' and '*vocativo*' without a downright threshing—" he shrugged his shoulders ruefully as he remembered his unlearned lesson. Everything had gone wrong with him that morning, and the thought of the birching that he was sure to get was more than he could bear. "I will na stand it any longer—I'll run away!"

Kit Sedgewick laughed ironically. "And when the skies fall we'll catch sparrows, Nick Attwood," said he. "Whither wilt thou run?"

Stung by his tone of ridicule, Nick out with the first thing that came into his head: "To Coventry, after the stage-players," said he defiantly.

The whole crowd gave an incredulous hoot.

Nick's face flushed. To be crossed at home, to be birched at school, to work all May-day in the tannery vats, and to be laughed at—it was too much.

"Ye think that I will na? Well, I'll show ye! 'T is only eight miles to Warwick, and hardly more than that beyond—no walk at all—and Diccon Haggard, my mother's cousin, lives in Coventry. So out upon your musty Latin—English is good enough for me this day! There's blue-bells blowing in the dingles, and cuckoo-buds no end. And while ye are all grinding at your old Æsop, I shall be roaming over the hills wherever I please."

As he spoke he thought of the dark, wain-scoted walls of the school-room with their narrow little windows overhead, of the foul-smelling floors of the tannery in Southam's lane, and his heart gave a great, rebellious leap. "Ay," said he, exultantly, "I shall be out where the birds can sing and the grass is green; and I shall see the stage-play; while ye will be mewed up all day long in school, and have nothing but a beggarly morris and a farthing May-pole on the morrow."

"Oh, no doubt, no doubt," said Hal Saddler mockingly. "We shall have but bread and milk, and thou shalt have—a most glorious threshing from thy father when thou comest home again!"

That was the last straw to Nick's unhappy heart.

"'T is a threshing either way," said he,



NICK ATTWOOD'S FATHER.

squaring his shoulders doggedly. "Father will thresh me if I run away; and Master Brunswood will thresh me if I don't. I'll not be birched four times a week for merely tripping on a word, and have nothing to show for it but stripes. If I must take a threshing, I'll have my good day's game out first."

"But wilt thou truly go to Coventry, Nick?" asked Robin Getley earnestly, for he liked Nick more than all the rest.

"Ay, truly, Robin,—that I will;" and, turning, Nick walked swiftly away toward the market-place, never looking back.

(To be continued.)